



OPINION FROM THE LEFT



Spaghetti Stained Screen

by Vittorio Zucconi

I hope that you like pasta of all kinds—spaghetti, shells, fusilli, penne lisce, penne rigate, bucatini, bow-ties, maccheroni, linguine—because this week I'm going to write about pasta and nothing but pasta.

Like thousands of Italians who live away from Europe, if I want to see any leftovers from Italian TV, I am forced to do something that I always refused to do back home: namely, to pay the exorbitant subscription rates for that rancid minestrone of personal vanity, journalistic propaganda, moronic variety shows, provincialism, and sumptuous behinds on dancing girls known as RAI International. For a few months now, having almost completely lost any interest in muddy soccer, and having to limit the number of behinds I admire (on my wife's orders) and of episodes of Bruno Vespa (on my cardiologist's orders), I find myself following more and more closely the only serious, honest programs that RAI International broadcasts: the commercials.

And now for the pasta. Pasta manufactured with the care that Michelangelo or Stradivarius used to lavish on their masterpieces in marble or wood. Pasta that "sets my soul a-tremble" (and my ears), pasta made with rice gluten, pasta, pasta. Occasionally a chunk of tortone, a bejeweled clock, or announcements of concerts in Atlantic City by froggy ex-singers, are stirred into the spaghetti pot, but the domination of pasta is absolute.

Allow me to clarify. I have nothing against advertising. It helps newspapers and other media to stay afloat without having to beg for public funding. Advertising is communication. It is a fun-house mirror—but still a mirror—of the soul of the nation that produces it, bearing the image of what that nation is or wishes to be. When I am sent to a new country as a special correspondent, the first thing I do is turn on the TV and open up a newspaper to comb through the ads, to get a glimpse of the country through the keyhole of advertising. Even in Soviet Russia, they used to have television commercials called "Reklama," which offered the frustrated Communist consumers products that were nowhere to be found in stores, in order to make people dream.

So if the global television network that Italian subscribers are financing is unable to attract advertising that does not consist of 90 percent pasta—a number I just pulled out of a hat—the result is inevitable. You have to conclude that in 2006, the only thing Italy has to propose to the world is nostalgic spaghetti dinners. Pasta may be exquisite, but it's still pasta. And at the end of the meal, a tiny cup of espresso.

Pasta has turned into the standard bearer of our civilization, which promotes the culture of slow food as a barrier against the barbarity of fast food. I can already hear you saying, "Alright already, I've heard this story before."

Admittedly, to do commercials on gigantic drills, cranes, or dikes would not work on a network whose viewers are solely concerned—at least judging from RAI International—with soccer dramas or how to get your pension in Argentina.

It is still depressing to note, however, that advertising, the mirror of collective vanity, never finds anything technologically sophisticated, new, scientifically important, inventive, or thought-provoking, now that automobiles made in Italy are disappearing from the world, leaving behind only the Ferrari, which rejects all advertisement as a matter of policy.

The world and the American universities are filled with Italian researchers, chemists, physicists, doctors, and engineers, as I know from the e-mails I receive, but on our collective passport you will never find their faces. Instead you will find the face of a fusillo with tomato sauce.

So eat heartily, fellow Italians of the world, and don't worry yourself with the thought that while you're living far away, the country back home is changing, modernizing, becoming unrecognizable. In the end, we're still just a country swimming in clam sauce.

Vittorio Zucconi is the Washington correspondent for Rome's *La Repubblica*.

Trans-Atlantic Scandals Payola Versus Bustarella

by Ennio Caretto

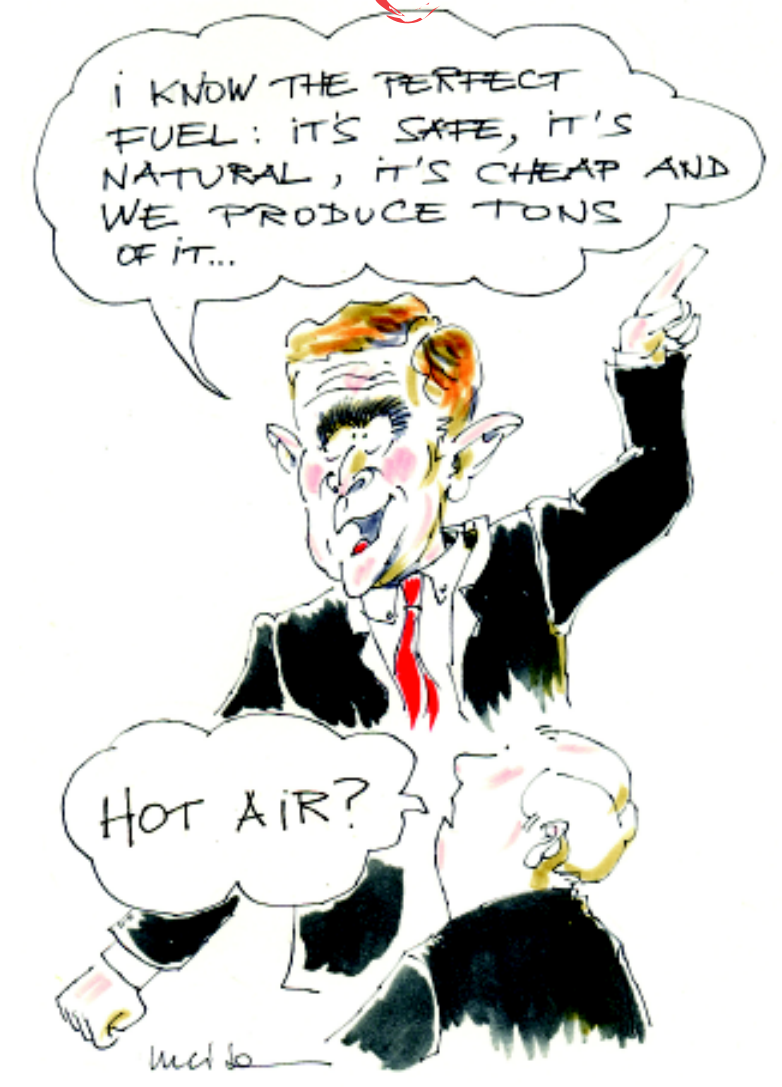


Sad to say, but if there's one thing that American and Italian democracy have in common today, it's corruption. With certain notable differences. In America, for instance, the scandals have a precise address: Wall Street, New York's temple of finance, and K Street, Washington's temple of lobbies. In Italy, on the other hand, they have no fixed abode. They live nomadically, so to speak, roaming freely from Milan to Parma, Rome to Palermo. In America the protagonists usually keep quiet, a sign, if not of belated respect, at least of holy dread of the law, whereas in Italy the disclosures fall thick and fast, as if the law were something subjective. In America, the prosecuting attorneys make public the corruption cases, while in Italy, wiretaps (legal, of course) and news leaks do the job. Above all, in America, the trials and sentences are quick, whether you are dealing with the CEOs of WorldCom and Tyco, who wound up in prison, or the former House Majority Leader, Tom DeLay, who had to resign from his post when faced by the prospects of a trial. In Italy, pressures on judges and the interminable workings of the judicial system often hands down the deserved punishments far too slowly.

These differences harm our country's reputation in public opinion the world over. Feuding between the parties humiliate it too, as happened during the showdown that led to the resignation of Antonio Fazio, governor of the Bank of Italy. In a delicate election year that might well see a reversal of political fortunes both in Washington and Rome, America may not appear ethically superior, but it certainly seems better equipped to mete out justice than Italy. In all likelihood, within the next few months, it will close the chapter of Enron, champion of the fake bankruptcies, and at the same time some eminent heads will roll during "Lobbygate," Jack Abramoff's Republican payoff debacle. Whereas it is entirely plausible that Italy will keep on floundering between half-measures and shelving judicial inquests. After the Wall Street scandals, America passed new laws against corruption, and after those of

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Ennio Caretto is the Washington correspondent for Milan's *Il Corriere della Sera*.



Life, Civil Liberties and the Pursuit of Happiness Bonino, A Woman on the Verge

by Tiziana Abate

After more than 30 years in the trenches of Italian politics, Emma Bonino, one of the founders of Italy's Radical Party, shows no signs of slowing down. From the early struggle to legalize a woman's right to choose, she went on to champion, among other causes, a universal moratorium on capital punishment. As the European Commissioner on Human Rights, she was one of the first to denounce to the world the oppression of women under the Taliban leadership in Afghanistan. Long considered a maverick in the Italian political scene, lately she is frequently on the short list of candidates for major international positions in the field of human and refugee rights. Tiziana Abate caught up with her, hot on the heels of a huge protest march in Milan in defense of gay rights.

Honorable Bonino... "Please just call me Emma Bonino."



Emma Bonino, do you remember the first time you were in a protest march?

"Perfectly. It was September 1974, a rally here in Milan to legalize abortion. I had received an abortion a few months earlier at the Sterilization and Abortion Information Center that Adele Faccio opened in the old city on Corso di Porta Vittentina."

How were things different then and now?

"Well, for starters there were only five of us. Last Saturday we were 100,000 or more."

Tiziana Abate, journalist and writer, is deputy director of culture for Milan's *Il Giornale*.



Emma Bonino

At New York's Italian Cultural Institute Vedova, Expressively Abstract

Lynne Lawner



An installation of Vedova's work "Ciclo dischi" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Castello di Rivoli, held in Turin in 1998.

One of the major artistic struggles of the previous century, for certain schools of Western artists, was to communicate political engagement and socially progressive ideas in non-figurative forms. The anguished dreams of the individual, the stirring aspirations of entire peoples—how could these be embodied in such intangible forms as squiggles, patches, splashes, and grids? Perhaps the greatest of Italian artists to grapple with this problem was Emilio Vedova, an abstract expressionist of a very special kind. To inaugurate their new exhibition spaces, the Italian Cultural Institute of New York is offering a special show of Vedova's work until February 25, 2006. The opening is scheduled for 6:00 p.m. on Thursday, January 26 at 686 Park Avenue in Manhattan.

On display will be *Partitura* from 1933; *Spazio Allarme* nos. 1,3,4,6,7, from 1990, mixed media on paper, rare engravings and lithography from 1960 through today, as well as *Frammenti* and *L'Angelo di Vedova* with a text written by the artist together with Massimo Cacciari, the philosopher currently mayor of Venice. The exhibition also includes *Aus dem Augenrund*, a folder with five

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Lynne Lawner, author and poet, reviews books for the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*, and writes about art exhibitions for *Art News*.

An Encounter with the Legendary Zeffirelli Don Franco's Don Giovanni



Franco Zeffirelli (right) with Conductor Huber Soudant during a rehearsal of "Don Giovanni." (Photo by Corrado Maria Falsini)

by Enrico Gatta

A slight seasonal ailment has not dulled Franco Zeffirelli's feistiness. Tonight, Mozart's "Don Giovanni," with his direction and the sets he designed in 1990 for a staging—rightly considered historic—at New York's Metropolitan Opera, is inaugurating the season at the Rome Opera. Under the Maestro, who is excited with the results of the dress rehearsal and delighted with the singers' performance in Anna Anni's wonderful

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Enrico Gatta is the cultural editor of Florence's *La Nazione*.

OPINION FROM THE RIGHT

The Italian Joy of Misery

by Alberto Pasolini Zanelli



Would you believe that a thing called "misery" can be a source of satisfaction, or at the very least, of relief, to some. It can, if that dreadful word, misery, is imbedded in an aseptic technicality like the "Misery Index." It's happening these days in at least two countries, both in the bittersweet agony of an election campaign. The first one is Canada, where the polls are just opening. The other one is Italy, my country, where a general election is called for April 9, a date that is like tomorrow for the Italian (and the American) habits. In Canada, a Liberal government is under strong pressure by a buoyant Conservative opposition. In Italy, a coalition of Center Right is under attack by an aggressive coalition of the Center Left. In both campaigns, the economy is a factor, but in Italy, more so. These are hard times for all Europe and the consensus in the liberal-left media is that the Italian economy is not just in difficult times, but is going down the drain. It is like an obsession: "We are the Worst."

Well, not so. A team of economists at Merrill Lynch has just reached the opposite conclusion, after submitting all of the seven countries that belong to the G7 (the U.S., France, Germany, Japan, the U.K., Canada and Italy) to a time-tested rating, the Misery Index. Its name is reminiscent of the era of its birth, the energy crisis in the 1970s and the consequent high inflation and unemployment. Nowadays, other factors are added, like growth rates, budgets and current account balances. The higher the total score, the worse your grades. In 1994, Italy had the highest Misery Index (something like 28), followed by the U.K., France and Canada. The U.S., by comparison, rated a lucky 13. That was 1994, during the first Clinton administration, Francois Mitterrand still ruled in the Elysée. Silvio Berlusconi ran and won his first campaign. He was thrown out of power, went back and is now concluding his second five-year stint and many say Italy is sinking into misery.

Look, then, at today's Misery Index scores, just released by Merrill Lynch. No, Italy is not at the bottom, nor near it. Our economic misery went from 28 to 16, nearly down by half. That is because unemployment went down and so did the inflation rate. The Italian economy is not growing very fast, but the current account balance is rather good. Taken together, Italy now has less misery than a couple of countries in the G7 club. Less than France, for instance, and, yessir, less than the U.S. The American economy is growing much faster than those of Europe, but so are the unbalances, current accounts and budget: it is the burden of the war and of the not very conservative deficit spending that comes with it. But the real surprise does not come from Washington. It comes from Rome.

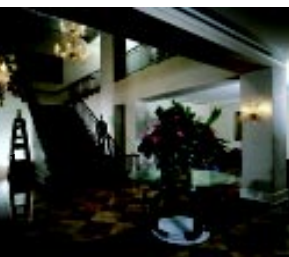
Admittedly, the Misery Index does not tell the whole story. But neither do the unilateral views, partial statistics and the tale of doom and gloom that is being fed to the Italian voters, ignoring others plan and surprising data. For instance, that after five years under a Center Right government, Italy has less unemployment than France and Germany for the very first time in modern history.

There are meaningful questions to be asked and answered from both sides of the partisan divide. The Misery Index was a powerful theme in at least two U.S. presidential campaigns. Jimmy Carter used it successfully to drive Jerry Ford out of the White House. Four years later, Ronald Reagan rode it to unseat Carter. And do not forget Bill Clinton's tenet in his bid to defeat George Bush Sr.: "It's the economy, stupid."

Alberto Pasolini Zanelli is the Washington correspondent for Milan's *Il Giornale*.

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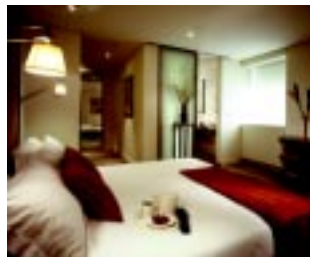


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